

*the Athanasian Creed Defended
and Explain'd.*

A

S E R M O N

Preach'd in the

PARISH-CHURCH

OF

E C C L E S H A L L

ON

TRINITY-SUNDAY.

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College, Oxon.*

Publish'd at the Desire of Several who heard it.



O X F O R D,

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I TIM. III. 9.

*Holding the Mystery of the Faith in a
pure Conscience.*

ALL the use I design to make of these words is to introduce a Discourse upon the Subject of the *Athanasian Creed*. It is appointed by our Church to be read several times in the Year, and amongst the rest on *Trinity-Sunday*; it contains an excellent Summary of the Christian Faith, concerning the Trinity of Persons in the Godhead, and the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ; and therefore should not be repeated without understanding; and some Persons are apt to express a Dislike of it, tho' they pretend to believe the Doctrines which it contains: Upon all which Accounts it cannot be improper to make some Observations upon it, partly to vindicate its use, and partly to explain its meaning.

It is no wonder that men who Disbelieve both the Doctrine of the Trinity, and the In-

carnation of the Son of God, should treat this Exposition of these Doctrines with Contempt and Scorn. Tho' this may be no very decent Part with respect to others, it is however, a *consistent* one with regard to themselves as it is agreeable to their own Principles. But with such men as these at present I have no Concern; for be it remembered, that I am not now to prove the Truth of these Doctrines, but the Expediency of this *Creed*; and the Debate is with Such only, as believe the Scripture to be the word of God, and that this *Creed* contains nothing in general that is contrary to it, but yet upon other accounts appear to dislike it. The proper Enquiry therefore is, whether this Dislike be founded in Reason?

Now the Exceptions of such men as these against this ancient Exposition of the Catholic Faith, may, I believe, be reduced to Two the *First* whereof pretends that it is *unintelligible*, so that People, at least common People cannot understand it; and the *Second*, that it is *uncharitable*, as it excludes every man from Salvation, who does not believe faithfully all the abstruse Points of this *Creed*.

With regard to the first Article, the Difficulty of understanding the *Athanasian Creed*, it

ought

ought indeed in Equity to be supposed, that
 They who make this Complaint, have no neg-
 ligence to charge themselves withal in this Af-
 fair. When a man complains that he cannot
 understand a Composition, the very Complaint
 seems to imply that he has considered it, and
 endeavour'd to understand it. For otherwise
 the Fault may be owing, not to the Compo-
 sition, but to his own neglect. It should there-
 fore be presumed, that when Persons complain
 that they don't understand this Creed, they
 are able to acquit themselves of all Blame, or
 Suspicion of negligence in the Case. And yet
 perhaps if we were to enquire of one of these
 Complainers, it would not be easy for him to
 recollect, that ever in his whole Life, he se-
 riously sat down for one half hour, to study
 and consider it. But if he asserts that he has
 fairly consider'd it, and yet is not able to un-
 derstand it, we must go farther, and examin
 whether there be not still some mistake at the
 Bottom.

For it is carefully to be observed, that there
 is a great Difference between understanding
 the meaning of the *Creed*, or the Doctrine
 which it sets forth; and comprehending the
 Thing itself, or the Mystery, to which this
 Doctrine relates. It is easy enough, for in-
 stance,

stance, to understand the Catholick Faith, to understand the orthodox Doctrine, concerning the Trinity, which the Scripture teaches, and the Church has always received: But it is far from being easy, that it is impossible to comprehend the Mystery of the Trinity itself, or to conceive the manner how three Persons are one God, or how the one God subsists in three Persons. And it may happen, by not attending to this Distinction, and thro' a little Confusion of Ideas, that a man may imagine he does not understand the *Doctrine* of the *Creed*, only because he does not understand the *Mystery* of the *Trinity*. This latter, 'tis certain, is above his understanding. But is there any Fault of the *Creed*? Take the *Creed* away, and will he understand the Mystery of the Trinity one jot the better? Or will any other *Creed* which the wit of man can devise give him a clear Conception of this mysterious Truth, and inable a finite Capacity to comprehend an infinite Object? But that the meaning of the *Creed*, or the *Doctrine* which it teaches, is not so dark and difficult as some men seem to apprehend, or affect to represent it, I shall now shew more distinctly, by laying a brief Explication of it before you.

The Two principal Points inculcated in this *Creed*, are the Doctrines of the Trinity, and of the Incarnation: That is, It teaches us that there are Three Divine Persons who are the One true God, and that one of These, *viz.* the Son was really and truly made Man. It is not the Business of *Creeds* to prove the Truth of Doctrines; *that* must be determined by Scripture. But the use and intent of a *Creed* is, to put a *Form of sound words* into the mouths of Christians, that they may be able to make proper Confession of their Faith; and also to guard and secure that Faith against the artifices and Evasions of Hereticks. Supposing therefore the *Truth* of these Doctrines, and resting *that* upon the Authority of Scripture, the *Creed* before us begins with shewing their importance, or the necessity there is that every Christian should believe them. "Whosoever will be saved; Before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith. Which Faith, except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly." The want of Charity, which is charged upon this Introduction, is to be considered hereafter; at present we are concerned only with its sense; which can hardly be render'd plainer by a Comment. Every Christian

Christian who is desirous of Salvation, and expects it upon the Terms laid down by Jesus Christ in his Gospel, must first of all, and before all things, embrace and hold fast the Christian Faith; the Faith which was taught by Christ and his Apostles, which was once delivered unto the Saints, and which has always, and every where, been received by the whole Catholick, or universal Church. And one Article of this Faith, an Article of great Importance, as it nearly affects our Practice our Worship, and our Prayers, is concerning the Doctrine of Three Divine Persons in the unity of the Godhead, in whose name we were baptized, and to whose Service we were then devoted. Now with regard to this Point, "the Catholick Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity." That is, maintaining at the same time the Distinction of the Persons, and the Unity, or Sameness, of Nature; believing (as our * Church expresses it) "that in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons of one Substance, Power, and Eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

* Art. 1. Of Faith in the holy Trinity.

This is the Doctrine of the Trinity which the Catholick Church has always taught; and if men cou'd have been content with this short and plain Account of it, there wou'd have been less occasion for the particular Explications that follow. But as various Hereticks arose, who in diverse manners attempted to corrupt and deprave it, therefore the *Creed* goes on more explicitly to guard and secure it against their Corruptions. Some, for instance, (whose names are not worth repeating,) held Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, to be but *one Person*; that it is one and the Same Person who is called by these three names; and that consequently the Father and the Holy Ghost were *made Flesh*, and died for us, as well as the Son. Others again, instead of thus confounding the Divine Persons, ran into a contrary Extreme, and divided the Substance; pretending that the Substance, or Nature, of the Father was different from *that* of the Son, and superior to it; and the Substance or Nature of the Son superior to *that* of the Holy Ghost. In opposition to both these Errors the *Creed* proceeds to instruct us to preserve and maintain the Distinction of the *Three Persons*, without confounding them into *one Person*; and the *Unity* of Substance, without di-

viding it into *Three Substances*: "neither com-
 "founding the Persons, nor dividing the Sub-
 "stance. For there is one Person of the Fa-
 "ther, another of the Son, and another of
 "the Holy Ghost:" Three distinct Persons
 "But the Godhead" the Nature, Essence, or
 Substance, "of the Father, of the Son, and
 "of the Holy Ghost is all one; the Glory
 "equal, the Majesty co-eternal." To explain
 this a little farther, —

"Such as the Father is, Such is the Son
 "and such is Holy Ghost," as to the Na-
 ture or Essence, and in all the essential Perfe-
 ctions of the Divine Nature. One of these Per-
 fections is absolutely necessary uncreated Ex-
 stence; and in this Perfection the Divine Per-
 sons are all alike; "The Father uncreate, the
 "Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost un-
 "create:" None of them Creatures, made out
 of nothing, or produced into Being by the
 Will and Power of another; but all existing
 in the sublimest sense of Existence, which is
 that of necessity of Nature. Another Perfe-
 ction of the Godhead is Immensity, or Om-
 nipresence; and this the *Creed* declares, ac-
 cording to the *Latin Original*, equally belong-
 to Each of the Three Persons; "The Father
 "immense, or omnipresent, the Son immense
 "and

and the Holy Ghost immense." For as to our *English Translation, Incomprehensible*, tho' it contains a true Proposition, yet it does not convey the true meaning of the *Creed*, unless we understand by *Incomprehensible*, what cannot be comprehended in Space, or included within Bounds. Another Divine Perfection is absolute and proper Eternity, without Beginning, and without End; and This again the *Creed* ascribes to Each of the Divine Persons, without any Difference or Inequality: "The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal."

If we keep in mind the Distinction between Divine Substance or Nature, and Divine Person, we shall not be at a loss to understand what follows, tho' perhaps the most puzzling Part of the *Creed*. Each of the Three Persons is eternal, "and yet they are not three Eternals;" that is, not three different eternal Substances, or Natures, which wou'd be three eternal Gods; But one and the same divine eternal Substance is common to them all; and therefore in this sense they are "but one eternal." It is the same thing as to Omnipresence, and necessary Existence; every one of the Divine Persons exists necessarily, and is present everywhere; and yet they are not

three immense, Self-existing Substances, (which again wou'd make three Gods,) but most intimately united in one and the same Substance which is omnipresent and uncreated; and the Unity of Substance, this Identity of Nature makes them to be but one God. In the same sense, and upon the same account, tho' ever one of the three divine Persons be Almighty "yet they are not three Almighty's, but one Almighty:" Because one and the same Omnipotence is enjoyed and exercised by them all. And as each of them has thus the whole Divine Nature, and all the Perfections of the Nature belonging to Him, it must necessarily follow that Each is truly and properly God; and yet since there is, and can be, but one Divine Nature, "they are not three Gods, but one God." To mention but one particular more, — "The Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Ghost Lord:" And yet as they have not three different Dominions, they are "not three Lords, but one Lord;" possessing and exercising one and the same supreme universal Dominion, the Kingdom that ruleth over all. We are obliged by the *Christian Verity* the Truths which are taught in Scripture, to acknowledge every one of the Divine Persons "to be God and Lord;" Because they are

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(which is represented in Scripture; and have the Titles, the Perfections, the Operations, and Worship of God, ascribed and given to them. At the same time we are *forbidden* by this Religion, and indeed by true natural Religion itself,) to say that there are "three Gods, or three Lords:" For all true Religion, and right Reason itself, assures us that there is but one God. If these Propositions be true, the unavoidable Consequence is, that the one God subsists in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

The *Creed* having thus taught us that these Divine Persons have all the same Nature, and the same essential Perfections, proceeds next to set forth their Personal Distinction; shewing that the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Holy Ghost, nor the Holy Ghost either of the other. The peculiar distinctive Personal Character of the Father is, that he is *αὐτοθεός*, God of himself; First in order, the Head and Fountain of the Deity; "The Father is made of none," or the Father *is* of none, neither made, "nor created, nor Begotten." The Son is distinguished by this, that He is "of the Father alone;" yet *not* made by him in Time, *nor created* out of nothing like a Creature; for there never was a Time

Time when he was not; "But Begotten." The manner of this eternal Generation we know nothing of; but as the *Nicene Creed* expresses it, He was "Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God, of very God, Begotten, not made, being of one Substance with the Father." The Personal Character of the Holy Ghost is, that He "is of the Father," (tho' not of the Father *alone*, but of the Father,) "and of the Son; yet "neither made, nor created, nor Begotten," of or by them, but *proceeding* from them, as the Spirit of Both: The Mode or Manner, of which Procession is above all Capacities, and consequently a point we have no concern with. These Characters then being proper and peculiar to the Divine Persons, to whom they respectively belong, sufficiently distinguish Them from one another and shew that "there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts." But lest this Distinction of Persons should lead us to suspect some Difference or Inequality of Nature, the *Creed* inculcates once more, before it leaves the Subject, their Co-equality and Co-eternity: "In this Trinity none is afore, nor after other," with regard to Duration; "nor

is greater, or less than another," with respect to essential Dignity; "But the whole Three Persons are co-eternal together, and co-equal." This Trinity of Persons in the Unity of the Godhead is to be adored and worshipped by all Christians, and this Doctrine concerning it embraced and held fast by them, they tender their everlasting Salvation. "So that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity," one God in three Persons, "and the Trinity in Unity," the Trinity of Persons in the Unity of the Divine Nature, "is to be worshipped." And he that is desirous to preserve himself from every dangerous and destructive Error as to this point, let him "thus think of the Trinity."

There is another Doctrine which is of the foundation of Christianity, any Change or Alteration of which affects and alters the very essence of our Religion; and *that* relates to the *Incarnation* of the Son of God. To this therefore the *Creed* next proceeds, and declares that "it is necessary to everlasting Salvation, that we believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ." St. *John* had declared long before that whosoever *confesseth* that *Jesus Christ is come in the Flesh, is a*
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Deceiver and an Antichrist *. If therefore the Denial of this Doctrine be, in the Judgment of an Apostle, a certain Mark of an Antichristian Spirit, there can be no great Rashness in declaring that the Belief of it, upon the known Terms of the Gospel, is necessary to Salvation. Now concerning this Point the "right Faith is *this*, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both God and Man; God of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds;" as has been above declared "and Man of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world;" at the Time, and in the manner, related in the Gospels. "Perfect God and perfect Man;" in opposition to the vain Dreams of some Hereticks, Some of whom believed him to be only a *made* or *nominal* God; while others denied the Reality of his *Body*, or else his rational *human Soul*: As an Antidote against whose pernicious Tenets, follow the words, — "of a reasonable Soul, and human Flesh subsisting;" that is, He had human Soul and Body both, as other men have. He is, as God, equal to the Father, in Nature and essential Dignity; but as Man,

* 2 Epist. v. 7.

and must be, his Inferior. "Who altho' he be God and Man," and has therefore Two Natures, yet He is not Two Persons, or two Christs, as some Hereticks have falsely imagined, "but one Christ." One he is, "not by Conversion of the Godhead into Flesh," or by changing God into Man, which is impossible; "But by taking of the Manhood into God;" assuming our human Nature, and uniting it with the Divine: And this altogether without "Confusion of Substance," that is, without any Mixture of the Divine and Human Natures, so as to compose a third Nature out of Both; for the two Natures remain'd distinct, tho' united in the same Person: Who is therefore "one altogether, not by Confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person." There is some Resemblance or Image of this even in our own Frame and Constitution; in which two different Substances, the Body and the Soul, are united without Confusion; and yet so closely and intimately united as to make but one Man: This Illustration therefore the *Creed* gives us by adding, "as the reasonable Soul and Flesh is one Man, so God and Man is one Christ."

The remaining Articles need no particular Explication; and if those we have been con-

sidering have some Difficulty in them, it should be remember'd that they are upon the abstrusest and sublimest Points of our Religion. Other *Creeds* seem more easy, with reference to these Points, it is only because they are more *general*, and descend not to such a particular Explication. But for that very reason they are liable to this Disadvantage, that they are sooner evaded, and the true sense of them explain'd away. And we saw by a late Attempt to reconcile the Service and Offices of our Church with the *Arian* Tenets, that when they were almost all turn'd aside by too artful a Hand, from their original Meaning; it was upon second Thoughts *, judged too desperate an undertaking to tamper with the *Creed* before us, which stood the great Bulwark and Preservative of the Catholick Faith. No wonder therefore that *Arians* and *Socinians*, and the whole Rabble of Hereticks and Unbelievers shou'd rail against it; the wonder that men of better Principles shou'd join the Cry; and upon very slight grounds shou'd endeavour to defame an ancient and valuable Exposition of the Faith, which they themselves

* The Interpretations of the Athanasian Creed in the first Edition of Dr. Clarke's *Scripture Doctrine*, were in the second and subsequent prudently omitted.

profess to believe. One of their Exceptions has been now considered; and to the other must say a word or two before I conclude.

In the *Second* place then they say that they dislike this *Creed* because it is *uncharitable*, and excludes every man from Salvation, who does not believe all the abstruse Points which it contains. Now the Truth is, this *Creed* neither contains *more*, nor more *abstruse* Points of Faith, than other *Creeds* do. With regard to two Articles, which appear to be of the very Essence of our Religion, it enters indeed into a more minute Detail, and is more particular in its Explications: But, I speak it upon the Authority of wise and learned men*, the Condemning Clauses, as they are call'd, do not extend to these particular Explications, but are intended only to secure the general Doctrine. And it shou'd seem that there is no want of Charity in declaring, that ac-

* The Commissioners in 1689, Thirty eminent Divines, appointed to review and correct the *Liturgy*, close the *Rubrick* they had prepared in the following words, "And the Condemning Clauses (*viz.* in the *Athanasian Creed*,) are to be understood as relating only to Those who obstinately deny the Substance of the Christian Faith." And since them to the same purpose Archbp. Syngé, Dr. Bennet, Dr. Waterland, Dr. Randolph, Dr. Wheatly, and others.

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cording to the Terms of the Gospel, it is necessary that Christians believe that there are Three Divine Persons who are one God, and that one of Them was truly made Man. If any Christian pretends that he *knows* not these Things, I would ask him, unto what were you baptized? And what, or whose Religion do you profess? Were you solemnly dedicated to the Honour and Service of Three Divine Persons? And do you constantly worship them, offering up your Prayers and Devotions directly to them, sometimes jointly to all, and sometimes separately to Each? And can you say after this, that you know not, or believe not, that Faith in them is any necessary Part of your Religion? What is, or can be, necessary in Religion, if it be not necessary to believe rightly concerning the very Object of your worship, and the God whom you adore? So again with regard to the Doctrine of Christ's Incarnation, will you say that you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and that you hope to be saved through Faith in his Blood? And can you with any Consistency say at the same time, that the Doctrine of his Incarnation is a Point of little Consequence, or that the Belief of it is not necessary to Salvation? Is not this to set Truth

and Error, Belief and Unbelief, upon an equal Foot? And to make Religion and no Religion the same thing? If therefore these Doctrines belong to the Foundation of Christianity, if you can make no Alteration in them, without altering the very Essence of this Religion, and changing it into some other thing; wherein is the *Creed* to be blamed, because it declares them to be thus essential to the Faith, and necessary to Salvation? The *Creed* lays down a general Proposition, that it is necessary to believe the Christian or Catholick Faith; a Proposition which might easily be proved, if any Christian, who knows what he says, was hardy enough to deny it. It then gives a particular and Circumstantial Account of Two great Articles of this Faith, relating to the Trinity and Incarnation. But if any man, merely for want of common good Capacity, cannot understand this Explication; the *Creed* condemns him not. It condemns no Man's Incapacity; it censures no Man's Ignorance, provided that Ignorance be not wilful; and then it ought to be censured, because it is without Excuse. For really these are Points of too great Consequence to be neglected. In short, as St. Paul says in another Case, that * *what*

* Rom. III. 19.

things soever the Law saith, it saith to them who are under the Law; so in this Case, what things soever the Creed saith, it saith to them whom it may concern; to them, who may understand it if they will; who want neither the means of Instruction, nor Capacity to use and apply them; and whose Ignorance, or Unbelief, is owing to their own Neglect or Prejudices, that is, to their own Fault. And the Creed condemn such men as these, it may I suppose be supported in doing so, both by the Reason of Mankind, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Men are apt enough to be indifferent in matters of Religion. The better Sort of them indeed will practise the common Decencies of Life, and perform the Offices of Humanity, Justice, and common Morality. They feel the good Effects of such Behaviour, in the value and esteem which it procures them; and the good Order and well-being of the world cannot be preserved without it. But one sometimes finds even in Persons of this Sort a wonderful Inattention, and a strange Indifference with regard to the first and most fundamental Doctrines of their Religion. It might possibly be with some view to this kind of Conduct, that the Compiler of the *Creed* inserted

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that are called the Damnatory Clauses. He
 is desirous to excite their Attention, and to
 rouse them from this unmeaning Slumber; to
 convince them that Something is to be be-
 lieved, as well as practised; and that in mat-
 ters of this Importance men should not trifle
 with God, and their own Consciences, and
halt between two opinions. To this purpose he
 declares, that the Doctrines he endeavours to
 explain are necessary to Salvation; because he
 thought this Consideration most likely to make
 men serious about them, and engage their
 attention to them. But the Censures, or
 Damnatory Clauses, are truly and properly no
 censures at all; but only general Declarations
 of the Importance of the Doctrines, or Di-
 ctions about them; and when explained, as
 general Declarations must be, with proper AL-
 lowances and Exceptions, very consistent both
 with Truth and Charity. "He that will be
 saved," says the Compiler, "must thus think
 of the Trinity:" Which tho' it may sound
 harsh, and look like a Censure, is in truth no-
 thing more than good Advice; is no more in-
 fect than if he had said, I have now explained
 the Doctrine of the Trinity in a sound and
 orthodox sense, and I would advise every Chri-
 stian, who wou'd avoid all dangerous Errors
 in

in this point, to think of it in this manner: He that is willing to be saved, and upon that Account desirous to avoid all damnable Heresies *ita de Trinitate sentiat*, let him thus think of the Trinity.

This is his Advice, and as I cannot conclude with better, it is mine: For tho' Orthodox cannot *cover*, it may prevent, a *Multitude of Sins*. Let us therefore hold this Mystery of the Faith in a pure Conscience; in Sincerity of Heart, and in Righteousness of Life: Not in Hypocrisy, outwardly professing what we do not inwardly believe, for the sake of worldly Interest; nor in Unrighteousness, as if right Faith would atone for a wicked Life. But let us *add to our Faith, Virtue*; so that we may *adorn the Doctrine of God our Saviour in all things*; and that he that is of the contrary Part may be *ashamed*; having no Evil thing to say of us.



Lately Publish'd by the Author.

An Enquiry into the Scripture Doctrine concerning Future Punishment, occasion'd by some writings, particularly Mr. Whitton's Discourse of Hell Torments.

The Inspiration of the Moral Parts of Scripture asserted. Sermon preach'd at the Triennial Visitation of the Right Reverend Father in God Richard Lord Bishop of Litchfield and Coventry Aug. 29. 1744.

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